

THE PRESS

South Toward Home

"Very few people really know Willie Morris," says David Halberstam of his friend and editor at *Harper's* magazine. "On the first level—perhaps you've read his book, *North Toward Home*—you visualize some terribly brilliant, worldly young editor. Then you meet him—the second level—and you confront this drawling, rather slovenly, Good Ole Mississippi Boy, all wide-eyed and awed by the Big Cave, as he calls New York City. And you say, 'My God, this guy is a fraud.' Then there's a third level, one he doesn't let many see, where you discover behind these two guises this very complicated, enormously sophisticated, strong man."

Third-level Willie Morris is now accessible to those who don't know him in the 120th Anniversary number of *Harper's*, out last week. This time he has turned south toward home, going back to his hometown of Yazoo City (pop. 14,000, slightly more than 50% black) in these days of court-ordered integration. The 22-page result, entitled "Yazoo . . . notes on survival," is thoughtful, deeply personal and brutally honest. Morris, now 35, leaves nothing out, not his ex-wife's hatred of Yazoo, not even an intensely Southern "premonition that had been working its way up my frontal lobe . . . that I would meet there, on my home ground, a violent death, perhaps even a death accompanied by mutilation and unfathomable horror. My premonition had an animal force to it, unlike the other premonitions in my life. *Some bastard is going to kill me in Yazoo.*"

Alluvial Soil. Morris was not killed. But the fear is always there, and Morris' essay witnesses the collision of boyhood recollections and journalistic reality. Or, as the author puts it, "the old warring impulses of one's sensibility to be both Southern and American." Morris' roots are sunk deep into "the black alluvial soil" of the Mississippi Delta, and "the pleasant, driftless Southern life" is his heritage and the source of his sensibility. But he has been 15 years away: to college in Texas, to England as a Rhodes scholar, back to Texas as an editor of the two-listed weekly *Texas Observer*, and the past seven years in Manhattan. Driving through Yazoo's "streets which are a map on my consciousness, I see the familiar places—the hills and trees and houses, in a strange, dreamlike quality, as if what I am seeing here is not truly real, but faintly blurred images caught in my imagination from a more pristine time."

The Mississippi that he rediscovers retains its "extraordinary apposition of violence and gentleness," but is also subtly changed. Segregated schoolhouses in Yazoo were eliminated, yet although classrooms remained black and white. Morris shows the new

mood: the white postman playing cards with three Negroes on his route; the white father who will not send his children to the white private school, because it is based on "pure ole hate." And, Morris writes, "I would see among blacks a new commitment to Mississippi as a place, as a frontier for redeeming some lost quality in the American soul . . . This generation of children, white and black, in Yazoo will not, I sense, be so isolated as mine, for they will be confronted quite early with the things



"HARPER'S" EDITOR MORRIS

The third level is now accessible.

it took me years to learn, or that I have not learned at all."

Morris' journalistic learning, or non-learning, began at age twelve, when he became sports "editor" of the *Yazoo Herald*. A decade later he came briefly to public attention when, as student editor of the University of Texas newspaper, he editorially accused the Governor and state legislators of collusion with oil and gas interests. He was asked to resign, but refused. The university countered by appointing a faculty supervisor for the paper. The next day Morris wrote that the appointee would "bring to the *Daily Texan* . . . the sensitivity of high salary and position."

After four years in England, Morris returned to his gadfly role, as editor of the *Observer*. John Fischer, editor of *Harper's* (himself a former Rhodes scholar who liked to keep tabs on that elite tribe), then called to offer him an editing job. Morris took it, and for four years worked quietly in Manhattan. In 1967, at Fischer's urging, *Harper's* president, John Cowles Jr., made Morris the youngest editor in chief of the old. "Fischer's revenge on New

York Jewish Intellectual Establishment. Little did he know."

Morris knew. He brought a Texas friend, Larry King, to the magazine, lured Pulitzer Prizewinner David Halberstam away from the *New York Times*, and persuaded his friend and fellow Southerner William Styron to run a 35,000-word excerpt from *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in *Harper's* at a fee several times smaller than he could have got elsewhere. But his official declaration of independence came when he signed Norman Mailer to recount his experiences at a Washington peace march.

Writers' Prerogatives. Mailer turned in 90,000 words. Morris read them all and deliberated with Executive Editor Midge Deeter for most of a drinking afternoon before deciding to run the piece in full, turning over a whole issue of *Harper's* to what was probably the longest magazine article ever published, "The Steps of the Pentagon." In book form, as *The Armies of the Night*, it won a Pulitzer Prize for Mailer.

As an editor, Morris acts more as a filter than an originator of ideas, but his greatest strength is in understanding, in Halberstam's words, "writers' prerogatives, what they feel, what they are, what is important to them." Often what is most important to them is to be given the freedom to write in the length and style they want to. Last week, Morris broached a story idea to his old Texas classmate, Bill Moyers, who had just been dropped as publisher of Long Island's *Newsday*. "Take a month, rent a car, see the country and do a piece on America," were Morris' only instructions. "What appeals to me about doing it," says Moyers, "is that Willie has no hang-ups about style, tradition, length—no preconceived ideas of shaping a writer. He is much more interested in me and what I might have to say than in his own idea of what I should say."